



INTERVIEW ([HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/](https://bombmagazine.org/format/interview/))

Melvin Van Peebles

Artistic development, near-death experiences, and the power of persistence.

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Melvin Van Peebles participates in "Unstoppable: Conversation with Melvin Van Peebles, Gordon Parks, and Ossie Davis," a 2005 interview moderated by Warrington Hudlin. Photograph by Adger Cowans. Courtesy of the artist.

Melvin Van Peebles is truly a renaissance man. While he is perhaps best known for the groundbreaking film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), it's only a small part of his oeuvre. He's published books and stories, released a record prefiguring spoken word and rap, reimagined *Sweetback* as an opera, and is currently working on two theatrical productions. A grounding place for Van Peebles through it all over the years has been painting, and last December he participated in a group exhibition at Merton Simpson in New York's Chelsea gallery district. Van Peebles is a small, slight man, who is terribly modest. I met with him a few weeks ago at his studio, and his friends and colleagues spoke highly of his honesty, generosity, and tenaciousness. He charmed us with his directness and authenticity. In his modesty, he avoided most of my questions about trying to get to the core of how he makes time for it all, but I did gain some insight into how exactly it is he came to be not only self-made, but also self-determined.

Melvin Van Peebles

I try not to be so heavy with these interview things. I try to loosen up because the thing I'm most known for *Sweetback*, which started the whole thing.

Lee Ann Norman

Yeah. I think that is what most people know about you, but when I was preparing for our conversation I was surprised to learn all of these other things about you, like that you studied literature in school and you've published novels, stories, and plays, and you make music and art—all of these things. But you started out as a writer, correct?

MVP

No. (*laughter*)

LAN

Okay, so tell me your arts story. How did you get into making stuff?

MVP

I actually started out as a business boy at ten. I was on the South Side of Chicago. We lived on 58th Street, which was the toughest street in America at the time. We were between Calumet and Prairie. My dad had a tailor shop in the basement of our building right next to the train (but there's not a train there anymore). By the time I was ten, I'd seen nine people killed right there in the street. It was tough! The neighborhood was run by a cop called Two Gun Pete, and he'd shoot you if you blinked! (*laughter*) That was just the world. So we moved to the suburbs. I walked to this big high school—about a mile and a half walk. In the winter—I laugh now about this sometimes because the winters were so bad—I could ice skate to school. (*laughter*)

LAN

Winter in Chicago is no joke!

MVP

Right! There were fifty-three black kids out of the 2,800 kids or something.

LAN

What school?

MVP

We were near Harvey, Illinois, the little part right outside it that was called Phoenix. The other black kids there had parents with big-time jobs working at the post office. That was big for us then in the '40s. *(laughter)*

I basically lived two lives. There was this white community at school, and even the black kids were like whites, but me—I had to get on the train every day and go to work back on 58th street. It was a whole different world, but I didn't know that.

LAN

It's just what you did.

MVP

Right. That's just what I did. I was small, and I've haven't grown that much since, *(laughter)* but I ran my dad's shop. He got a Coca-Cola box for me to stand on so I could reach the cash register. Then he could go out and make deliveries. To the workers there, I was the boss. They called me "Pee Wee." When my dad would leave, I'd say, "Alright. Get everything done before Dad comes back." They were good about doing their work, except when ladies would wander in. They'd go back in the clothes racks to do the funky monkey. Sometimes they would say, "Hey Pee Wee, come over here," then they'd take my hand and you know ... *(laughter)*

LAN

Oh my gosh! They were trying to get you in trouble. *(laughter)*

MVP

I wasn't nothin' but eleven years old. *(laughter)* I was waaaaay ahead of my time. Instead of paying me, my dad started giving me clothes that people didn't pick up from the shop, and I'd sell them on 58th Street. I look back and think that it's hilarious now, but back then, it was just my life.

LAN

So how did you come to painting after being a little business man?

MVP

One day we went to the Art Institute on a school field trip, and the guide was showing us one of the paintings. He asked us if we knew what it was called, and I did—me, the little black kid. I got a scholarship for painting in a summer program right there on the spot. Being the size that

I was, I didn't go outside and play with the other kids. I was always reading. That's how I knew the answer. I was a living in the hood, hood, *hood* of the hood, but I learned how to *handl* as they say in Yiddish.

LAN

That's interesting. I feel like so much of what you've done in your career has been in that spirit. You wanted to do something, so you just figured out what you needed to do and did it. How did you find your way into filmmaking?

MVP

Oh no, that has nothing to do with film shit.

LAN

So how did you get end up making movies?

MVP

Okay, I'll just explain to you what happened. When I finished grade school, I was ten, but my mother wouldn't let me go to the high school because I was so young. She thought I was too young, and she didn't let me go until a couple years later. So I started high school when I was twelve, and I graduated when I was fifteen and that's still—young. I went to one college for a year, and said to my mom that I wasn't going back there. She said to me that it was because I was around too many white people, so she wanted to send me to a *real* school, a colored university. Down in West Virginia or something like that. She'd never been to college. Nobody in my family had gone to college.

LAN

So how did she choose that one for you?

MVP

Because it was colored. That's it.

LAN

(*laughter*) Okay, so it didn't matter which one, just that it was black.

MVP

Yeah. But the kids were kids, and I wasn't a kid. I was a grown midget. (*laughter*) So I did the things you do, I joined a fraternity, and got kicked out—well, no, I walked out about a week later. You know, the way you learn: they paddle you, and I was like, "Fuck this shit."

LAN

Yeah. That's why I never did it. I didn't understand why I should let someone beat me up to be my friend. (*laughter*)

MVP

Yeah, homey don't play that shit. (*laughter*) I was a loner down there, and they didn't have the best equipment or textbooks. I'd come from one of the best high schools in the nation, so I was way ahead of everyone else, but to them, I was just this midget coward. One of the teachers that I would talk to said to me once that I didn't have to go all the way back across campus after class, but I could stay with him. He wanted to do the funky monkey, and I was like: get the fuck outta here. (*laughter*).

LAN

That's crazy! (*laughter*) But you know, I think because you are a smaller guy, people thought they could take advantage of you.

MVP

Yeah. I knew about the world. I went back to college, but I chose this one. I hadn't even looked at the place, but I wanted to choose it myself. It was Ohio Wesleyan. I joined ROTC because they paid you. I didn't know what it was. (*laughter*) When I graduated, I'd saved a little money, I was gonna go to Europe, but ten days after that the Korean War started, and all the people who had been in the ROTC—

LAN

You were called up.

MVP

Yeah. My mom drove me all the way down to the base in Texas because she didn't think I would make it there alive. And she was right. I got chased by two lynch mobs. When they saw me, they'd say, "Look at that nigger!" They'd never seen a black officer, let alone one who looked like a fourteen-year-old. One night, I got on the bus and sat down. The driver said to me to go to the back. I said that there are no seats in the back, so I'll sit here. Then all of the white people stood up, so I opened up the doors of the bus and ran. What saved me was that it was evening. I could see the light from the base.

I started out in pilot school, but I flunked out. I wondered why because I was flying pretty well. So I checked it out, and I found out that all of the blacks failed. I learned that the wash-out rate for whites was five percent and for blacks, it was ninety-eight percent.





Ghetto Mother's Prayer, 2006. Mixed Media, 89" x 63". Courtesy of Merton D. Simpson Gallery.

LAN

Yeah, something doesn't seem right.

MVP

Mmhm. So next they sent me to learn navigation, but I wanted to be in the planes that carried the nurses back and forth. I was top of my class, so I put in that I wanted to be on the 47s. They just built a new, top-secret plane—the B47 bomber—and I got assigned to those.

LAN

So did you end up flying any missions?

MVP

Yes. Three people flew them: me (the navigator), the pilot, and the pilot's assistant.

I'm up here flying one of the most dangerous planes in the world when all I wanted was to be on one of those little fat planes carrying the nurses back and forth. (*laughter*)

LAN

How many missions did you fly?

MVP

Oh, I don't know. I didn't really pay attention. One time when we were flying along the Bering Strait, the pilot says that engine number three was giving us trouble, and he was going to have to cut it off. He keeps going along cutting engines one by one, and we only have six. We're in trouble. Suddenly, I heard a voice say, "Lord, oh Lord. Look out for us Lord," and it was a black-sounding voice, but I'm the only black guy in the plane, so I'm thinking, "Who the fuck was that?" Then I realized it was me. (*laughter*) But we made it back. We made it back.

A few days later, I'm getting ready with my crew and the Captain comes and says, "Lt. Peebles, I'm going to fly in your place today." He outranked me, so I didn't think anything of it. As an officer, I could live off of the base, so I lived in a little bungalow about two miles out in the desert. I called a lady friend, asked if she'd like to come over. I said, "I'd like to paint your portrait." She agrees, so I get into my little Studebaker, go down the road and pick her up. We get back, I got my paints and started painting. I ask her if she can loosen her tie—she was still in uniform—and she does. Can you loosen, this, this, until eventually she's buck naked. (*laughter*)

LAN

That was your plan all along! (*laughter*)

MVP

Well, this was long before the sexual revolution. The next morning we wake up, and she acts shocked: "Where am I? What happened? I don't know what came over me. I've never done anything like that before." I play along.

As we're getting our clothes on, we hear this huge explosion. I'm thinking again, "Lord, oh Lord ..." I look out the window and see smoke, so I get in the car and drive out. One of our planes crashed. We had ejection seats in them, but something happened, so there wasn't time. There was a body in the seat. It was the Captain who had taken my place. I think: "Goddamn. This could have been me. Somebody up there likes my ass ..."

So ever since then, I've been laughing. Even when I'm losing fights, I'm cheering while I'm gettin' my ass kicked. (*laughter*) After that I forged my papers and got out of the service.

LAN

That's so much living for such a short amount of time. How old were you by then?

MVP

Probably about twenty-three. After that I was in Mexico, then San Francisco, where I used to drive cable cars. First I tried to get a job with the airlines, but they wouldn't hire no niggers. I wrote a book about the people on the cars, and the book sold.

LAN

Were you were surprised?

MVP

No, I wasn't surprised. Shit, I knew it was good. (*laughter*) One day, this guy gets on the cable car and has my book, and says, "This is a good little book." I ask him to show me and he says that he'd like to meet the author. I tell him that's me, and he says, "Wow! It's just like a movie." So that's how I got into movies. (*laughter*) I thought I'll teach myself how to make one. My first feature was about ten minutes long. I couldn't get anyone to pay any attention to it or anything, so that's when I thought I'll go into astronomy, and applied to go study in Holland.

And I was working on the films and I thought they needed music, and friends were like, "Yo, we got your back," but they never showed up. So I got a kazoo and that's how I started making music. (*laughter*)

LAN

You didn't play piano or anything like that growing up?

MVP

No, I just did it myself. I never had anybody I could depend on growing up, so I didn't worry about it. Anyway, I made these little films, went down to Hollywood. They offered me a job as the elevator operator, or a dancer, and I'm like, "Fuck this." That's when I went to Holland.

LAN

Eventually, you made an album *Brer Soul* (1969) that was a little like spoken word poetry—you would "sing-say" over the music.

MVP

No one had ever done that before.

LAN

Right, so how did that come to you?

MVP

Well, I couldn't sing no better. (*laughter*) To this day, I can't read or write music, but my bands can. That's still the way I do. I just do it.

LAN

I think most people do what sounds good. I don't think Beethoven or anybody put things together for any other reason than they liked the way it sounded. I think that's very freeing in a way, particularly for you. People might have expectations for you because of the way you look or sound, but you have the strength of character to do whatever you want and haven't allowed yourself to be put in a box.

Now, you've been making artwork all the way through, but you recently started to show them, is that right? You were just part of group exhibition at Merton Simpson in Chelsea. What made you decide to—

MVP

No, no—that's how I got through high school and college. And in Mexico, I lived by painting. When I was doing a movie or something and I needed some artwork, I made a painting. I just make it. That's all. When I had time, I would just make it. When I was in the Air Force, or with the kids, in my spare time, I'd just make it. What you do in your spare time is one thing, but I don't really have any spare time.

LAN

You do seem to keep yourself busy. What are some of the things you're working on right now that you're excited about?

MVP

Well, at the moment, I'm thinking of doing a couple of plays. Of course, everything I usually have to do it myself. Someone will say: he can't do that, and I have to prove them wrong. *(laughter)* I'm writing a bunch of books about this and that, and I have a couple of musical offers.

LAN

I mentioned before that I see a lot of these themes in your life and work: make yourself, do it yourself, don't let other people put you in a box. Just by looking at a few pages of the play you've shown me, it makes me wonder if you ever think of yourself in a political way. For some people, living one's life in a way that goes against what society might say you are supposed to be or how you're supposed to behave is radical. It's brave to do your own thing. You probably don't think that you have an agenda or political perspective about the way you live your life, but I wonder, where does that feeling come from?

MVP

When you're out there pulling a wagon with clothes trying to sell them, it changes you.

LAN

It makes me think of that saying: when life hands you lemons, make lemonade. I feel like that's so you. Is it about survival?

MVP

No. It's not survival. Fuck that, no. I'm just tryin' to get shit done.

More information on the group show Like Now: Adger, Melvin, and George can be found [here](http://mertonsimpson.com/art/archives/1186#.VMk7gmTF9fY) (<http://mertonsimpson.com/art/archives/1186#.VMk7gmTF9fY>).

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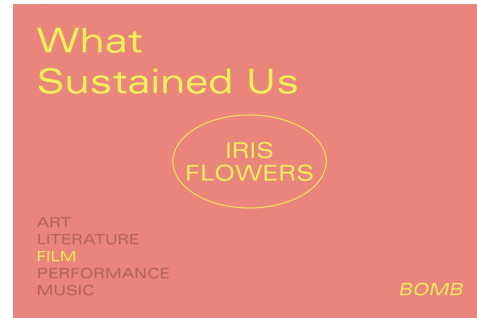
Lee Ann Norman is a New York-based writer and culture maker whose interests lie in the ways others read the world and how their reading(s) influence everything.

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